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## ABSTRACT

Today, the majority of countries are characterized by multicultural diversity, a factor which has enormous implications for early childhood educators. As we begin to understand the long-term benefits of participation in high quality early childhood care and education, educators must also recognize that their own cultural heritage can and does influence their perspectives on what is considered the best interests of young children. The potential for conflict between teacher, parent, and child arising from differing values and practices can be high unless educators attempt to understand their own beliefs and to change prejudices and behavior. While it is recognized that culture plays an important role in shaping many aspects of child rearing and family interaction, it is not always recognized that culture also shapes the educational opportunities which are provided for young children in any society. Differences exist in the orientation of educational programs (intellectual training versus socio-emotional development), how they are provided (privately-owned or government-operated), and their approach to curriculum (standardized versus individualized). To provide high quality early education programs, educators need to look beyond any favored model or method of provision (for example, developmentally appropriate practice) and begin to define a set of principles which are fundamental to good practice and which can be responsive to and incorporate cultural patterns and values relevant to individual communities. Such principles include articulation of clear aims and objectives, development of broad child-centered curricula, and commitment to equal opportunity and social justice. (Contains 15 references.) (EV)

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## CHILDREN, CULTURE AND EDUCATION

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The ecology of childhood and its implications for early childhood education has become a focus of attention for many early childhood educators and researchers throughout the world. Gura (1994:97) has suggested that '... what childhood signifies at any time in history or in any society is a reflection of its demography, politics, economy, culture and spiritual life'. While numerous researchers have examined factors, such as the characteristics of the family, the mother, the child and the interaction of such characteristics with features of the community in an ecological approach to understanding childhood and children's development, it is necessary to take an orientation which is broader than this micro-system perspective. Development can only be fully understood when it is viewed in the larger cultural context. The culture in which children are reared may be the mainstream or dominant culture or children may be reared in one of the many sub-cultures which are to be found in most countries. Because children and families are embedded within local communities, within particular political and economic strata of society as well as within particular ethnic or cultural groups, today's children grow up with very different experiences and expectations about the world and consequently need educational services which take into account their diverse backgrounds.

The world in which we live is becoming smaller - a global village - with families, for a range of reasons, moving to and settling in countries which may be quite dissimilar to their country of origin. There are few countries which can claim a homogenous population. Today, the majority of countries are characterised by multi-cultural diversity, a factor which has enormous implications for early childhood educators. One of the implications of contemporary immigration patterns is the increased need for opportunities for dialogue between early childhood educators within their own communities and countries, as well as contacts with colleagues in other countries. An

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outcome of such collegial communication has been that our understanding about the similarities and differences between children and their different experience of childhood has deepened. There is much to be gained by learning about the values, expectations and practices in other countries which relate to children and education. Rebecca New (1994), at a recent conference in Melbourne, Australia argued that the multiple perspectives provided by international inquiry broadens educators' understanding of both the task of education and of children and their development. With the world's children growing up in rapidly changing societies and themselves undergoing important changes, international conferences will assist in achieving those ends which are particularly important as we define our goals and priorities for early education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our current understanding of children points to the existence of a high degree of universality in terms of their development and learning. However, there is much evidence to show that a high degree of diversity also exists which arises from factors such as environmental conditions, personal characteristics and individualised pathways to and processes for learning. More than ever before, the onus upon educators and those responsible for planning and developing educational programs for young children is to deliver education that is responsive to the diverse needs presented by children today. As my Australian colleague Margaret Clyde (1994:3) reflected '...we need to consider both the learners and the learning context' when we are considering the type of early education that is to be provided for young children. Herbert Zimilies (1991) suggested that one of the challenges for early childhood educators is to provide educational agendas for young children which focus upon sameness and difference, which recognise the uniqueness of each child as well as the commonness between children and which is grounded in each child's primary frame of reference in terms of family, society and culture. This becomes a huge task when we consider the pluralist nature of most countries today.

An increasing amount of research evidence has demonstrated the importance of the early years in children's lives and the long term benefits derived from participation in quality early childhood care and educational programs (Landers, 1991). Some proponents of early childhood education, for example Archard (1993), go as far to suggest that universal pre-school education is part of a child's rights, part of the right of every child to the best possible upbringing which inherently includes children's access to their origins - national, cultural and social. Participation in a quality structured environment, such as a child care centre, nursery school or kindergarten, can provide considerable benefits in terms of young children's physical, intellectual, social and emotional development (Archard, 1993). For example, children appear to be better prepared for later educational opportunities, their need to develop linguistic skills is met, they can be actively creative and independent while at the same time developing important non-familial emotional ties in an atmosphere of cooperation with other children. Along with being socialised by their parents to become a member of their society

and culture, they are taught the values and priorities of their society and culture by one of society's traditional agents of socialisation - the teacher.

However, such early childhood programs need to reflect and value each child's origins which often is not easy for teachers who themselves are not objective and value-free beings (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994). Early childhood educators must recognise that their own cultural heritage can and does influence their perspectives of and attitudes about what is considered in the best interests of young children and the best possible upbringing. The potential for conflict between teacher, parent and child arising from differing values, expectations, attitudes and practices can be high unless early childhood educators attempt to understand their own beliefs, begin to change their own prejudices and behaviours that may interfere with nurturing young children's development and learning as well as learning to see their own culture in relationship to society's history and current political realities (Derman-Sparks, 1993). This is extremely important in places, such as Europe and Asia, where national boundaries are undergoing considerable change and where the recognition of traditional cultural identities is being demanded as ethnic pride is being voiced. In such circumstances, young children will need assistance from able early childhood educators in order to develop a positive self-concept and group identity without needing to feel superior to other ethnic groups, particularly if this involves developing a multicultural identity, for example, Australian-Vietnamese, British-African-Caribbean, Korean-American or Russian-Israeli identities.

While it is recognised that culture plays an important role in shaping many aspects of child rearing and family interaction, it is not always recognised that culture also shapes the educational opportunities which are provided for young children in any society. When considering early childhood education, in its various forms and settings, it is essential that educators are conscious of and base their programs and curricula upon the fact that children, child development and learning can only be fully understood when viewed in the larger cultural context (Berk, 1994). Culture is a very powerful force in young children's lives. It shapes representations of childhood, values, customs, child rearing attitudes and practices, family relationships and interactions as well as the provision of services outside the home, especially educational services. Each culture expresses an attitude about the value of children in that culture, for example, by the way children are treated and in the focus and philosophical basis of the educational programs that are provided for them.

Educators, especially those working with young children and families need to be aware that culture influences the values, attitudes, expectations and practices which structure the educational settings and experiences offered to young children. While it must be acknowledged that the following examples are generalised stereotypes, they help illustrate differences in cultural orientation. For example, in France, the orientation in early child care and education is on intellectual training and academic achievement; in Great Britain, until a child is three, the emphasis is on social development but from

then on academic competence is stressed; in Sweden, there is relatively little emphasis on specific educational goals in the early years where the focus is on developmental issues, particularly socio-emotional development; in Israel, the focus is upon the socialisation of children from diverse cultural backgrounds into the Jewish-Israeli community; in most Asian countries (where primary health care and physical wellbeing are no longer issues for young children), the orientation in early childhood services is on academic achievement and excellence; in the Czech republic (Graves and Gargiulo, 1994), while academic achievement is not stressed in the early years, young children are taught the value and importance of work and aesthetics and cultural programs are introduced by the age of three years; in Russia, early childhood programs devote considerable attention to health and physical education. In Australia, early childhood services have been characterised by their developmental focus. However, parents are becoming interested in early academic achievement for children aged between three and five and are beginning to demand a greater academic focus in the services that they use.

Countries also differ in relation to whether the services for young children are community-based, work-based, privately owned and operated or funded by government. This reflects cultural attitudes about who should be responsible for socialising young children, values related to family autonomy and selfreliance and levels of public support for young children and early childhood services. In this morning's address, children's right to a public upbringing as opposed to a private family upbringing was discussed. While the notion of a public upbringing by non-familial adults is regarded as acceptable, indeed even preferential to a private family upbringing in Sweden, it would be considered to be most unacceptable and not in the best interests of the child in Australia where families are perceived to be the most appropriate context for child rearing.

The approaches of different countries to early education also vary in terms of the implementation of standardised curricula versus responding to the individual needs of children, small group versus large group instruction, teacher-centred versus child-centred processes and the valuing of routine and order as opposed to valuing child initiative and creativity. Such dichotomies, which have arisen from the limited alternatives in approaches to early childhood education currently utilised, do little to advance early childhood programs and their ability to meet the needs of young learners. It is necessary to move beyond, for example, the 'academic versus socialisation' debate in order to establish a sound basis for decisions about early education and curriculum.

While many early childhood educators are sensitive to the role that culture plays in education, some still do not appear to be aware that culture can cause difficulties for children in educational settings if the influence of culture is not acknowledged, valued and acted upon in curriculum decisions. Recurrent difficulties between early childhood educator, child and parent can occur from the different values, expectations, attitudes and practices held by people socialised into different cultures but living in a society dominated



by a particular culture. Our heterogeneous societies demand culturally responsive educational services, practices and programs which can actively engage the increasingly diverse community of young learners and which can at the same time help children build upon their own sense of identity.

Neuman and Roskos (1994) have highlighted three features of a culturally responsive approach for young children in early childhood programs. This approach aims to affirm children's own cultural identity and develop an understanding and appreciation of other cultures. First, a culturally responsive approach acknowledges and appreciates children's home cultures and attempts to build upon skills and knowledge which children already have acquired. Second, it promotes collaboration among and between children and adults as they learn through social interaction. Through social play, each child's cultural and individual differences can be expressed in ways that can promote the mutual acceptance of differences, the sharing of cultural perspectives and the construction of new knowledge.

Last, a culturally responsive approach to education becomes an opportunity to help children function well in their own culture as well as in the mainstream culture. Consequently, it is also necessary to set the same standards for achievement for children from diverse backgrounds as for those children from the mainstream culture. Setting different standards for different children according to their cultural background can disempower them, marginalise them and put them at a disadvantage which is not consistent with the rights of the child to the best possible upbringing. Early childhood educators need to set the same goals for all children but may need to select different ways of meeting these goals for children from non-mainstream cultures. Spodek (1991:165) argues that 'Only by making our educational values explicit and by reflecting on them as teachers make curriculum decisions, can we be sure that the values reflected in our program activities are the values that we wish children to gain. This is essential when we come to consider the question 'what should early education be?'

The reconceptualisation of early childhood education has been a popular topic of debate at a number of recent early childhood conferences. While Spodek (1991) argues that this may be a result of a growing conservatism in early childhood education, rather it suggests a willingness on the part of the field to critically analyse numerous aspects of early childhood education, including the philosophical and pedagogical bases of curriculum. It appears that certain early childhood educators from a variety of backgrounds are beginning to question their present vision of what young children need to know and learn and the ways in which young children construct knowledge. It is common in such debates to find proponents of particular points of view supporting their arguments and generalisations with reference to research findings. While not wishing to be disrespectful to my American colleagues, one of the limitations of these dialogues is that much of the research which is referred to has been derived from studies undertaken in America. While these findings may be valid for some American children and early childhood settings, given the predominantly white, middle class background of many

researchers, it is doubtful if such findings can be generalised to young children and early education systems in other countries, given the range of social, cultural and political differences which are to be found, as well as the variation in child rearing practices exhibited within and between different groups of people.

Much of the literature concerning early childhood education is dominated by Western, democratic values, beliefs and practice and reflects very much an ethno-centric orientation. In Western societies, the debate about what early childhood education should be has tended to focus upon examining the relative merits of and differences between the dominant models: the maturationist view, the cultural transmission view and the cognitive-developmental view (Jipson, 1991). To date, there have been few exponents of subject-based, curriculum driven approaches to early education, although these appear to be increasing in number. At the same time, many societies are demanding competent children because they are considered to be the building blocks for a skilled, capable and competitive workforce. In the West, this has produced a degree of tension between early childhood educators who, for the main part have endorsed and adopted the cognitive-developmental model for early education (which is referred to as 'developmentally appropriate practice'), and the general community which is demanding a re-emphasis on basic skills training and competency-based education for children at younger and younger ages.

Several writers, among them Jipson (1991), Spodek (1991), Walsh (1991), Clyde (1994) and New (1994), have suggested that the developmentally appropriate practice approach to early education may be unsuitable for some children because first, many early childhood educators do not really understand what it means and how to implement it; and second, because it fails to take into account the cultural context in which children and educators exist (Jipson, 1991). Moreover, some practitioners have expressed concern about the applicability of developmentally appropriate practice to certain early childhood contexts, for example, parent cooperatives (Jipson, 1991). It has been suggested that the developmentally appropriate practice approach does not necessarily reflect the diversity of perspective, experience, values and traditions present in our pluralist communities and, in a hidden curriculum, may even impose a particular class and cultural bias on children, which may sometimes also be elitist.

In addition, Kessler (1991) suggests that the emphasis by early childhood educators on developmental theory ignores curriculum issues by attending largely to the process of teaching but not to the content to be taught to young children. When early childhood educators perceive early education merely as development, contextual factors, such as culture, which have significant impact upon what is to be taught can be obscured. Early childhood educators need to be concerned with developing sensitivity to and insight about where young children are coming from and what knowledge and skills they need to be competent within their own communities and the larger society. This requires respecting and incorporating the cultural beliefs

and practices of the local community or communities into educational settings and programs so that young children have the kinds of educational experiences which will enable them to participate meaningfully and competently within their own society.

In order to provide quality early education programs for young children, early childhood educators need to look beyond any favoured type of model or provision and begin to define a set of principles which are fundamental to good practice and which can be responsive to and incorporate cultural patterns and values relevant to individual communities. Approaches to education can differ considerably from one another and still help children become participating members of their society if they are based on sound principles. Some of generally acknowledged principles which are considered to underpin good practice regardless of the model of early education adopted are:

- the establishment and articulation of clear aims and objectives about what early childhood educators want to achieve;
- the creation of well-planned, stimulating and secure educational environments in which play and conversation are valued;
- the development of broad, balanced and child-centred curricula which include a variety of active, meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences;
- the development of warm and positive relationships with adults and peers; and
- a commitment to equal opportunity and social justice for all, with curricula reflecting and valuing each child's family, home, culture, language and beliefs as well as teaching children respect for and appreciation of the richness that diversity brings to our pluralist societies.

Along with these fundamental principles, there are a number of other criteria which are associated with quality educational provision regardless of the type and structure of program. These are;

- well-trained staff who are aware of the importance of continuity and consistency in young children's development and learning;
- appropriate adult-child ratios;
- relevant and meaningful curricula;
- adequate resources;
- regular monitoring and evaluation of the quality of practice;
- participation of parents and liaison with the local community;
- opportunities to interact with a diverse peer group; and
- a multi-professional approach.

Early childhood educators have considerable autonomy in their work, even when they are required to implement standardised curricula. This is because they continually have to make informed choices from a range of available options. As such, early childhood educators are in fact creators of education, not merely implementers of a pre-defined curriculum. However, the choices should not be made in a vacuum, isolated from children's knowledge, needs,



interests, family, culture or the local community and its concerns. The choices should be based on principles derived from methodologically sound research.

In today's climate of professionalisation, practitioners and other early childhood professionals are urged to engage in research into all aspects of children, families and service provision in order to improve the quality and responsiveness of services offered. Although there appears to be a growing trend for cross-cultural research, the focus of much investigation still appears to be on examining differences among samples of children from the same culture. Much of the intra-cultural research appears to assume that all children of one culture develop in the same way. In the same way, much of the transcultural research is looking to test if the findings from one culture are universally true for children of all cultures. Future research needs to investigate a number of the complex dimensions of culture which includes examination of the socialisation of children from a range of subcultures who are living within a mainstream or dominant culture. Such research recognises the different learning environments that young children experience within any culture. I have attempted to undertake such research with a number of samples of mothers who are living in Australian society and others who are living in their countries of origin. There are many methodological obstacles which must be acknowledged and controlled for. It is not easy research but that does not mean that it should not be undertaken. Because it will only be when the complex relationships between children, culture and education are more fully understood that new practices and models of early childhood education may emerge which may allow early childhood professionals to be more responsive to the needs of the world's young learners.

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